

In 2006 New College school, in my constituency, was

- the worst secondary school in England for truancy
- the worst in the "value-added" league tables
- and fifth from bottom overall for GCSE results.

Just one in 10 pupils taking GCSEs at the school scored five grade Cs or better, while the truancy rate was running at more than 10 times the national average.

Last Friday, just 6 years later, New College was named by the Schools Network as being in the top 10% for school improvement in the entire country.

The number of children getting 5 A-Cs at GCSE including English and Maths has gone up by 450%.

Those getting 5 A-Cs overall has gone up by a staggering 700%.

Jane Brown, the Head Teacher at New College, says three key things have helped them achieve these phenomenal results.

First and foremost having the right teachers: moving on those who weren't up to scratch and replacing them with the very best.

Second, the focus and financial support from the National Challenge Programme, which enabled New College

- to get external support, including from the ex-head of education at Nottingham
- and pay for additional resources, like tutors to give intense one-on-one support in English and Maths.

And third, not allowing the school to get blown off track by different Government initiatives, but focusing consistently and relentlessly on what really matters to help children learn, aspire and achieve.

The teachers, support staff and students at New College deserve huge congratulations for their hard work, commitment and success. Whilst they are rightly proud of their achievements, they are not complacent, and determined to make even greater improvements in future.

I've spoken to Jane, and other heads at the secondary schools in Leicester West, about the Secretary of State's plans to change GCSEs.

They say - and I agree - that having a single exam board is a positive step that could help

- tackle unhelpful competition between exam boards
- prevent some Heads thinking 'which exam will get the best results for my school' rather than 'how can we give our students the best education for life'.

But they do not support a return to a two-tier system where children are told at age 14 what they can and cannot achieve.

Telling some children - before they've had a chance to fully develop - that they're not good enough to do O' levels won't boost their self esteem, it will crush it.

Telling them they can only manage CSEs - which will inevitably be a less valued qualification - won't raise their achievement, it will cap it.

We should not be putting a ceiling on children's aspirations - we should be blasting those ceilings away.

This is a backward step from an out of touch Government that has no understanding of what it really takes to help children from chronically deprived backgrounds aspire and achieve.

Jane Brown - who has proved what can and must be done to turn schools around - says labeling children so early as failures would be disastrous.

Instead of helping schools like New College – who’ve created a “yes you can and yes you will” culture for all of the students, all the way to the end of year 11 – the Government’s proposals will return us to the days when some children end up believing “I can’t, I’m a failure”, particularly if they come from very disadvantaged backgrounds.

That’s why I urge the Government, in the strongest possible terms, to rethink their damaging plans.